

THE DIFFERENT SHADES OF HUGH

A Two-Act Play

By Clete Keith

CAST OF CHARACTERS

HUGH, a struggling painter

DIANE, Hugh's ex-fiancee

MARIS, works in the art gallery across the street

MICHAEL, owns the art gallery across the street

PAUL, an artist who happens to drop by

PAUL'S FRIEND, an artist as well

SETTINGS

Hugh's loft downtown.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Present day. The entrance to the loft is off the street below. Stairs lead up into the loft. A buzzer is at the top of the stairs to let guests inside.

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ACT 1

Evening. A loft in the city. It is the hidden world of an artist. Three art easels, shelves upstage center with a couch on a platform underneath. A large bank of small industrial windows fill the upstage wall above. Large shelves down left and right jammed packed with paintings. No paintings are on the walls.

Upstage right is the entrance from the street below. An intercom buzzer is on the wall near the entrance next to a light switch. A card table is against the stage right wall.

Stage left of the couch is a refrigerator and a toilet in the corner which is hidden by hanging, paint splattered plastic. Downstage from that is a sink with several water spritzer bottles and a closet door.

Downstage left and right are window frames that look out to the street below. Two plastic crates under the left window serve as a small table that holds a CD player and a coffee maker with a carafe. A floor heat radiator is under the right windows.

Center stage is an easel that holds a painting. Next to it is a chair that has a water bottle placed on the seat. Next to it is an art cart on wheels that holds art supplies.

Two industrial hanging lamps hover above the loft.

(The stage goes dark.)

(A very faint moonlight fades up and spills in through the bank of windows. Movement can barely be seen on the couch. A man gets up and walks to the upstage light switch near the entrance. The sound of metal tapping can be heard. Then...

SPARKS ARC from the light switch. The jolt sends the person flying backward. He lands on the floor and doesn't move.)

(Finally, he crawls to the couch and turns on a lamp. It's HUGH. He is dazed and clutching a screwdriver. His clothes are splattered with paint. In a panic he puts down the screwdriver, and pulls down an old metal lunch box from the shelf.)

(He sees a bottle of water on his chair by an easel. He stares at it. He looks around the room then back to the bottle. Confusion. He opens the lunch box and peers inside. He reaches into the lunch box. He looks at the painting on the easel and freezes. He stares at the painting. Looks back to the lunch box. Back to the painting... and shuts the lunch box.)

DIANE (O.S.)

(in hallway)

Hugh? I'm here!

(Hugh rushes over and puts the lunch box back up on the shelf and grabs the screwdriver.)

(A crash is heard.)

Damn it!

(Hugh rushes up to the light switch and sees the wires hanging out of the wall.)

I just dropped the... Shit! Be right there!

(Hugh quickly puts the wires back in the wall and screws on the switch plate. He pushes his art cart away from the easel, grabs the painting and shoves it into the downstage shelves. A portion of the painting can still be seen.)

(Diane enters with a cheese platter, flowers, a large bag, a tablecloth, a bottle of sparkling cider, and cups. She is wearing a nice dress.)

DIANE

Hi there. Sorry, I'm a bit late. I stopped along the way and picked up some things.

(She places all the belongings on the card table.)

I put up a sign downstairs at the entrance about your "Opening." I hope that's okay with...

(She looks around the loft.)

Hugh, there's nothing ready. Where are your paintings? What happened to the paintings we picked out and hung up yesterday? And you haven't even changed your clothes. And I thought I mentioned balloons. I know you said we're using up all the helium on this planet for balloons, and once it's depleted, it's gone forever.

(She walks slowly toward him.)

But if ever there was a night to deplete this planet of helium, this is it. Are you sweating? You look a little flush.

(She sees a spot of yellow paint on his cheek. She stares at it.)

Have you been painting?

(Hugh shakes his head "no." She reaches to wipe it off his face and he turns away, wiping it off himself.)

(He walks over and quickly shoves the painting farther into the shelf and stares out the window. When he looks back, she is watching him intently.)

(She walks over to the shelf and pulls out the painting. She holds it up. It's painted in dark greys and blacks but with spots of yellows and reds.)

This is an interesting painting. Maybe that's how you got that paint on your face.

(They stare at each other. Finally... he takes the painting and puts it back on the shelf.)

He watches her walk over to organize everything on the card table. She looks back at Hugh who looks back out the window.)

What is that smell? Did you burn something in here?

HUGH
(hesitates)

Toast.

DIANE
It doesn't smell like toast. It smells like burnt...

HUGH
Did you see what was going on across the street at that gallery? It says the "Jeff Yeomans Exhibit."

DIANE
It's so pretentious. It's like a circus over there.

(Diane smells the toaster on the card table.)

And how about those acrobats up on the poles swaying over the red carpet? I couldn't watch. I kept thinking one of them was going to come loose and fly off into traffic. And check out that tower of balloons. Obviously *they* don't give a shit about the planet.

(She starts to lay out everything on the table.)

DIANE
Our opening will be unpretentiously environmentally correct.

(She looks up by the wall switch which has a burn mark around it.)

(Hugh looks back to her.)

(She picks up the cheese platter and shows Hugh.)

DIANE
I dropped the cheese platter, so now it's assorted.

(She looks inside the platter.)

DIANE

Damn it. I forgot the toothpicks! I don't want people using their fingers to pick through the cheese. You know, when their fingers have been in their mouth and they move the cheese around and you can see the pieces they've touched are kind of shiny? It's gross.

(He looks back out the window.)

Hugh, try and not let that carnival over there ruin what's happening over here. It's just a bunch of lights and balloons. I've seen the same thing at a Pinkberry.

(Beat. She checks her watch.)

It's almost six o'clock. Ten minutes. It's just enough time for you to change your shirt and pants and get your paintings back up.

(She tries guiding him to change his clothes.)

HUGH

Do you like my work?

DIANE

Of course.

HUGH

I watched you as we put them up and you never really looked at them so how do you know if you even like them or if they're any good?

DIANE

If they're yours, I love them.

HUGH

Do you honestly think my work now is as good as when we were together? Do you remember those paintings I...

DIANE

It doesn't matter to me whether it was back then or now.
The truth is your work has always attracted me.

(She checks her watch.)

We still have to get your paintings up. Please, for me, get a clean shirt and pants, and go change. Hurry. And some other shoes that aren't... painted.

(Hugh enters the closet. Diane grabs her cellphone and dials. She starts filing through the paintings on the shelves.)

DIANE

Hi. Are you guys coming? You said you'd be able to make it. What about Kacey and Jon? Did they say they could...

(She checks another shelf of paintings.)

Then what about you? Just for a half hour.

(She sees the bottle of water on the chair and walks over to it.)

No. I'm just supporting him. That's all. I...

(She stares at the water.)

He's fine. He's doing... Then do it for me.

(The closet curtain is shoved open. Diane hangs up the call. Hugh steps out in different pants and shirt that don't have quite as much paint on them, but the same shoes. He sees her looking at the bottle. She looks back at him. She smiles.)

Same shoes, but... okay.

(Hugh picks up the water bottle. They stare at each other. Awkward silence. He opens it. He has a sip. He offers her some. She takes his bottle, grabs a jar from the shelf and dumps in the water. She looks back at him. He smiles but appears to be slightly unnerved. She smiles back and puts the flowers in the jar.)

Let's get your paintings up like we had them.

(They walk over to the shelves, pull out some paintings, and begin to put them up.)

You moved some things around.

(She watches Hugh closely as he places the paintings on the wall.)

It took me forever to figure out the proper layout of your couch, the card table, your chair. According to my book on feng shui, I'm not sure this nourishes and supports you. Standing at the entrance, visualizing energy as water flowing into the room, to me, it feels like it would rush right out the window.

HUGH

Great, then I won't drown.

(They put up the last painting.)

DIANE

How about some music?

(She pulls out a CD from her purse and hands it to Hugh. He puts it in the CD player. She points to another bag.)

Grab that bag on the floor.

(Hugh takes the bag and pulls out a red door mat.)

DIANE

(grabbing it from him)

They're not the only ones having a red carpet opening tonight!

HUGH

No. Di. No.

(She places the mat near the entrance. It looks pathetic.)

And we don't need no stinkin' balloons! Turn on that music and let the purchases begin.

(Hugh reluctantly turns on the music. Lights slowly cross fade to later that night. Hugh turns off the music. Finally...)

HUGH

I think we needed the stinkin' balloons to draw attention to the stinkin' paintings.

DIANE

Maybe it's a parking issue?

HUGH

Two hours? Helen Keller could park in two hours.

DIANE

Next time I'll reach out with more texting or emailing, or Facebooking.

HUGH

There is no next time, Di.

DIANE

Twitter! I forgot to Twitter. I should have been Tweeting. Maybe I should have been tweeting every minute or so with updates.

HUGH

Yeah, so in two hours you could have sent out a hundred and twenty updates to the people that didn't want to go in the first place and let them know that they still weren't here.

(They put things away.)

DIANE

How about we make a coffee and catch up a little? I promise not to discuss your feng shui-less room.

HUGH

No. I'm good.

DIANE

Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.

HUGH

Okay.

(Hugh walks over to the door.)

DIANE

I'm going to leave all this with you in case you get hungry. I know you can't eat the cheese... but... maybe the crackers.

(She gets her purse.)

And I'll leave the flowers. They brighten up the room a bit. Do you want to keep the red carpet?

HUGH

It might draw focus away from my paintings.

DIANE

Then I'll take that and the sign downstairs, as well.

(She rolls up the mat and walks up to Hugh at the door.)

I know if I do a Craigslist thing or Tumble us in a link or whatever, we'll get more people.

HUGH

One would be more people.

DIANE

Then let's do this again in a week or so.

HUGH

No. Thanks.

(Beat.)

DIANE

I'm here for you. Always was and always will be.

(An awkward peck on the cheek and she exits. He walks downstage and looks down to the street below. He gives a slight wave.)

(He walks to the refrigerator, grabs several water bottles and puts one on the floor downstage center.)

(He places another bottle directly across the room from the other. He grabs a digital laser measurer from the shelf.)

(He begins to measure and adjust one bottle to the other and then puts back the laser.)

(He rolls the cart that holds his art supplies over to the easel.)

He grabs the painting he shoved into the shelf, places it on the easel and begins to paint. It goes from bad to worse. He stops.)

(He goes to the refrigerator and pulls out more bottles, placing them downstage. He measures again with the laser. He sits back at the easel and tries to paint.)

Damn it.

(He makes one more effort and puts down the brush. He holds up the painting and looks at it closely.)

This is garbage.

(Walking into the loft, unnoticed, wearing a coat with his worn shirt is PAUL. He surveys the paintings on the wall.)

It's all garbage.

(Hugh snaps the painting in half and tosses it on the floor.)

(He turns to sees Paul...)

Ahhhhhhh!

(Hugh stumbles back in fear. Paul stares at him.)

Who are...!!?

(Paul glances at the work on the wall by the entrance.)

You scared the hell out of me!

(Paul continues inspecting all the paintings.)

Did Diane leave the door open? Did she twittle you or something on her way home?

(Paul continues to digest the artwork. He walks over to the demolished painting on the floor and examines it.)

The extravaganza is over. You're too late.

(Paul turns abruptly and begins to leave.)

You wanna give me a hint of what you think of my...

(Hugh watches him exit and yells after him.)

Do you want to take the cheese platter? I'm lactose intolerant, so I can't... Hello?

(He runs over to the window and looks down below. He grabs a pair of binoculars, looks through them and waves.)

Hey! Up here! Yeah. Thanks for all the input! Appreciate it!

(Hugh watches him leave. He puts down the binoculars and shuts off the lights.)

(LIGHTS CROSS FADE TO NIGHT)

(Hugh lays on the couch for a restless night of sleep. Through the night he checks near the front door, the bathroom, in the closet, under the bed, near the radiator.)

(LIGHTS CROSS FADE TO MORNING)

(Hugh puts the broken painting away and takes another painting and puts it on the easel. He stares at it and then rolls his chair down to the window. He grabs his binoculars and looks out. He picks up the coffee carafe, takes a sip of coffee, and suddenly ducks away.)

Oh shit.

(He peeks down below, trying to see. He ducks back in.)

Why is she coming over here?

(The intercom BUZZES. Hugh is alarmed. It's quiet. Then... BUZZ. He runs over to the wall and stares at the intercom. It BUZZES again. He finally presses the button.)

Hello?

MARIS (OFFSTAGE)

Hello.

(Beat.)

HUGH

Hello.

MARIS (OFFSTAGE)

I work across the street at the gallery.

HUGH

Hello.

MARIS (OFFSTAGE)

I have something I think is yours.

(Hugh checks the room for what's missing.)

(Long beat.)

Hello?

HUGH

Hello.

MARIS (OFFSTAGE)

May I come up?

HUGH

Up here?

MARIS (OFFSTAGE)

Uh, yes.

HUGH

Um... well... uh...

(Hugh buzzes her in. He quickly rolls the art cart and easel out of the way. He straightens out his bed/couch. He takes the painting off the easel and shoves it onto the shelf. Maris enters. She is wearing trendy business attire and carrying a bag.)

Hi. MARIS

Hello. Hi. HUGH

Hi. MARIS

Hello. HUGH

My name is Maris. I work at Michael's Gallery. MARIS

Okay. Hi. HUGH

Hi. *(beat)* And what is your name? MARIS

(Beat.)

Hugh. HUGH

It's nice to meet you. MARIS

(She sees the two water bottles on the floor but is distracted by the paintings.)

You *are* an artist.

(Beat.)

I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry. I just... I mean, working in the art field, I'm just interested in artists... their artwork... and I would have thought that I would have seen you painting at some point. In the window.

HUGH

In the window? Were you watching me?

MARIS

No. I mean... it's only because I'm across the street. I look out our window, minding my own business, and I look up, actually glance up, and there you are. And it's like... oh, there he is. (*beat*) I must sound like a stalker. I assure you I'm totally harmless... just... curious.

(Beat.)

So, where did you live before moving here? (*beat*) Damn, I did it again, didn't I? Sorry.

HUGH

I was living somewhere else.

MARIS

(smiling)

In a land far, far, away?

HUGH

Something like that.

MARIS

Last night as we were setting up I noticed you had a sign out by your door about some sort of opening. Was it for your art?

HUGH

Well... yeah... in a way it was... sort of ... uh... we had a small gathering... type of function. I wouldn't call it an "opening" per se. Just a small crowd... a gathering of people, really a couple of friends... friend, type thing. It wasn't like your red carpet affair with... champagne... bright lights... acrobats, and those God damn balloons.

MARIS

Not a big balloon lover?

HUGH

No, it's not that. It's just about...

MARIS

The helium?

HUGH

Yeah.

MARIS

The depletion?

HUGH

(surprised)

Yeah. Exactly.

MARIS

I know. Once it's gone it's gone. I told Michael I don't want to use them anymore but he could care less. If it catches someone's eye and helps make a sale, he'd gladly use up all the remaining helium.

(Awkward silence. She gestures at his paintings.)

May I?

HUGH

Uh...

(She puts down her purse and bag and starts wandering the room.)

They're really not... they're just sketches, kind of renderings... of paintings... that I was thinking of painting... but... ended up, sort of, drafting... with a brush... kind of.

MARIS

I see. Okay.

HUGH

They're probably better observed farther away.

(Maris backs up a couple of feet.)

HUGH

Like across the street.

(She smiles.)

They're not very good.

MARIS

Well, they're dark, with a tinge of moody. It's all subjective. I mean, what is good? Right?

HUGH

I know when my work is good. And this isn't good.

MARIS

So why did you have an opening?

HUGH

My friends... friend talked me into it. The intention being better than the outcome.

MARIS

Tell me your influences.

HUGH

Pot, mushrooms, ecstasy.

MARIS

I'm serious. Tell me who you admire.

HUGH

Pretty much all the Impressionists. Post Impressionists. Some of the fab Fauves. I like how they place colors in juxtaposition instead of what you would normally expect to see.

MARIS

I like that too.

HUGH

It would be better if I could actually execute what I just described to you.

MARIS

That takes years.

HUGH

I've been painting for years.

MARIS

It's about the journey. If it's your dream, follow it. "Happy are those who dream dreams and are willing to pay the price to make them come true."

HUGH

Would you like a cup of coffee? It's not real warm. I made it yesterday, I think.

(He grabs a cup and pours but...)

Whoops. This has some paint in it.

(He swirls around the paint.)

Kind of gives it that mochachino latte look.

(He holds it up to her. She laughs.)

Gonna pass?

MARIS

I think so.

(He puts down the cup and holds out the carafe.)

No thanks, I'm good.

(He places the carafe back down.)

MARIS

It's amazing.

HUGH

I know, I'm quite the host, aren't I?

MARIS

(smiling)

No, you remind me so much of my brother.

HUGH

(not a good thing)

Your brother? I do?

MARIS

Your whole vibe. He was witty, and made me laugh. Like you. And he was an artist.

HUGH

Was witty? *Was* an artist? Which means he probably became cynical, got burned out, and gave it up.

MARIS

Actually, he died.

HUGH

Oh. Shit. Sorry. Sometimes my "witty" conversation should be kept to myself.

MARIS

That's okay. He was twenty-two.

HUGH

Twenty-two? Wow. Was it an accident?

MARIS

He was... sick.

HUGH

That's pretty young to get sick.

MARIS

He was bipolar. *(beat)* He was haunted by his pursuit of perfection. I would tell him over and over how I thought his work was amazing, but he just couldn't hear it. The last time he called me was late at night and by the time I got there he was on the floor... *(starting to see it again)* facing away from his painting. Like he couldn't bear it.

(Beat.)

He drank a can of turpentine. He was still holding his brush. Like he still couldn't totally let go. Like maybe he had made a mistake.

(She is near tears. Hugh steps closer.)

HUGH

Yeah, maybe. *(beat)* Maybe he didn't mean to...

(Hugh looks around and gets a rag off his art cart and hands it to her. She tries to find a spot to wipe her eyes but there's too much paint. She smiles and hands it back to him.)

MARIS

Thank you.

HUGH

Sorry.

(She gets a tissue from her purse and wipes her eyes.)

What kind of artwork did he do?

(Maris hesitates then pulls out a laminated sketch.)

MARIS

I keep this with me everywhere I go.

(She shows it to Hugh, who stares at it.)

HUGH

Woodbury School of Arts.

MARIS

My God, how did you know?

HUGH

I just... just looking at it.

MARIS

You could tell by just looking at it?

HUGH

Yeah. It's easy to spot. The simplicity. The composition. The movement of the line. It screams Woodbury.

MARIS

But how do you know about Woodbury?

(Beat. Hugh then hands her back the illustration.)

HUGH

I actually went there... for a while.

MARIS

You did? I was told only the best were accepted there.

HUGH

She says as she looks around the room wondering, "Then why does his work look like such shit?"

MARIS

No. I wasn't thinking that. I mean...

HUGH

It's okay. It's a valid question.

(Her cellphone RINGS.)

MARIS

I'm sorry. Please, excuse me. (*into phone*) Yes, Michael. Jeff is on his way? I'll be there in a few... no, no, no, I'm coming right down...

(She hangs up.)

It's my boss. I've got to go. I told him I was coming over here to bring you the...

MICHAEL (OFFSTAGE)

Too late! Door open! On my way up!

MARIS

I'm so sorry. We'll leave here immediately.

(Into the loft enters MICHAEL, an arrogant, egotistical gallery owner. He's wearing a suit. He scans the loft.)

MICHAEL

What the hell is up here? Oh, it's a storage unit.

MARIS

No, it's not.

MICHAEL

I thought they were going to make these dumps into lofts?

MARIS

They did.

MICHAEL

Can you imagine living up here in this rat hole? Who the hell would...

MARIS

Michael, this is Hugh. He lives up here.

MICHAEL

No shit?

(Michael turns and talks to Maris quietly.)

You're lucky your head isn't chopped off and in his refrigerator.

MARIS

Michael, please don't start....

(Michael walks downstage and looks out the window.)

MICHAEL

That fuckin' French acrobat who fell off the pole, and landed on the Kia, is going to sue us. He said it was because our sidewalk is at an angle. How is that our fault? Fuck that Frog. He has no balance. I should sue him for false advertising.

(Michael turns to Hugh.)

So you must have seen our opening last night. Pretty impressive, huh? There were so many God damn people there, I sold shit I wouldn't give away to my grandmother.

(Michael sees a painting and looks at Hugh.)

I swear when I pulled up yesterday I saw a little sign by your front door about some opening upstairs. That wasn't for up here, was it?

MARIS

Let's get back for Jeff.

MICHAEL

You're an artist?

(Hugh nods/shrugs.)

And you had an opening the same night as my opening? That takes some big, meaty, bison balls.

MARIS

Michael, you said Jeff will be here any minute, come on.

MICHAEL

So what you're saying to me is, "Michael, I'm an artist and I live right across the street from your gallery and I'm going to have an 'opening' the same night you have your 'opening' because my artwork justifies having an 'opening' the same night as your 'opening' and my work is far better than what you will be displaying at your 'opening' because that's how confident I am in my work." Isn't that what you're saying?

MARIS

Michael.

MICHAEL

To me it sounds like that's what you're saying. So with that said, why not have a set of virgin eyes look at your work, and trust me, that's the only thing on my body that is virgin.

(He smiles as he looks at Maris, who doesn't.)

Let me give you an honest, unbiased evaluation. If it's good, I'll tell you it's good. If it's bad, have the fuckin' nuts to take the criticism right between the eyes. Fair enough?

MARIS

We're leaving. Nice to have met you.

HUGH

Fair enough.

MICHAEL

Let's have a look at my competition.

MARIS

No. No. No. Michael. Let's go.

MICHAEL

He said, "Fair enough."

(Michael looks at the paintings.)

MARIS

Hugh says these are just sketches or drafts that he...

HUGH

Let him look.

MARIS

No. Michael, let's not take up anymore of Hugh's time. We can come back.

MICHAEL

Actually, it's my time we're taking up, and I'm almost done. We'll be out of here soon enough. Trust me.

(He turns to Hugh.)

I could blow a chimney full of smoke up your ass, but that's not who I am.

MARIS

Michael, please.

MICHAEL

Your courage is a hell of a lot better than your artwork.

MARIS

That's not fair.

MICHAEL

Hey, he said he wanted an honest, impartial critique and that's what I'm giving him. Your work is below average, at best. And that's being very kind.

MARIS

Michael.

HUGH

Continue.

MICHAEL

Don't take this personal, but your attempt is amateurish, poorly conceptualized, and worst of all, bland and boring. A child entertaining himself with paints and crayons could do better.

MARIS

That's totally uncalled for.

MICHAEL

(between the eyes)

No, it's not. When I started out in this business, I had convinced myself that I was an artist. But I never had anyone come to me, man to man, and tell me the truth, that my work was (*points at a painting*) garbage. (*points at another*) That it was pathetic.

MARIS

You're being too harsh and rude.

MICHAEL

I'm being honest. If somebody had told me the truth it would have saved me years of ridicule and embarrassment. But nobody did. So here's a little insight, Lou.

MARIS

It's Hugh.

MICHAEL

If the work is good they'll say it's better than it really is. If it's bad, they don't want to hurt your feelings so they'll just out and out lie about how wonderful it is. I'm sure at your little 'opening' last night they all must have lied right to your face. It's all bullshit. Flattery is bullshit. Ninety-eight percent of the time when someone says they are flattered by your work, it's out of embarrassment. You can never trust flattery. Flattery is a whore. You'll trust everything you cherish to flattery, and it will rip your fucking heart and soul from you. And you'll wait, and wait with all the hope you can muster for it to come back. And if by chance a miracle happens, and it does come back... flattery will talk you into believing the lie all over again.

(Beat.)

So be fuckin' honest with yourself, sell all this shit on ebay and use the buck and a half you make to buy some dignity.

(His cellphone RINGS. He checks it. He looks at Maris.)

It's Jeff. Let's go.

(He answers the cellphone.)

Jeff! What a night! What a crowd! Best opening we've ever had. Lawrence Manship called back and bought two more! "Dusk on the Bay" and "Drama at Dusk." Clearly he's got a "dusk" fetish. But who the hell cares. He loves your work!

(Michael looks out the window and walks to the door.)

Stay there. We're on our way over. No, that was the best opening we have ever had! You are the best artist I have ever displayed...

(He signals to Maris to join him and he's gone. Silence.)

MARIS

I am so sorry.

HUGH

I wanted honesty.

MARIS

He's such a pompous asshole.

HUGH

He's an honest pompous asshole.

(Her cellphone rings.)

Speaking of honest pompous assholes, I've have to go. (*into her phone*) I'm on my way, Michael, relax. Yes, I'm walking down the stairs.

(She hangs up.)

It was nice to have met you.

(She points to the bag by the door and exits.)

(Hugh takes out Diane's red mat from the bag. He pulls back the curtains to the bathroom, tosses the mat on the floor in front of the toilet and sits staring at the mat. He closes the curtain.

(DAY TURNS TO NIGHT)

(He looks out, picks up the mat, and places it downstage center. He shuts off the light.)

(He pulls out three water bottles from the refrigerator. He places them in a triangle position next to each other in the center of the mat.)

(He hurries over to the shelf and grabs a flashlight and laser measurer. In the dark, he walks over to the bottles and shines the light from the top against the bottles. Then he shines the red laser into the bottles. As the pattern forms, Paul enters and walks up behind him. Hugh moves the light around in circles, he sees Paul and shrieks. He shines the light on him.)

Shit!! Who is that?! It's you.

PAUL

It is.

HUGH

Did Maris leave the door open?

PAUL

I don't know. Did she?

HUGH

Why are you... You didn't come back to buy a painting?

PAUL

No.

HUGH

Thank God. I would have lost all respect for you.

(Hugh turns on the lights.)

PAUL

I've come back to discuss your work.

HUGH

Living a boring life, are we?

(Paul looks at a painting. Hugh joins him.)

For some reason I thought I could make those colors work.

PAUL

Impossible.

HUGH

Did it really take this long for you to figure out that all my paintings are just plain bad?

PAUL

Is that what *you* think?

HUGH

Judging the painting in front of us, yes.

PAUL

You are correct.

HUGH

Then why didn't you tell me that when you first came up here?

PAUL

I needed time to digest.

(Paul walks over to the painting.)

HUGH

Your meal or the work?

PAUL

Both.

HUGH

Well, the last guy who tried to “digest” my work pretty much spit it up and called it “shit.”

PAUL

The gallery owner across the street?

HUGH

Yeah, you know him?

PAUL

A critic is someone who meddles with something that is none of his business.

HUGH

Where were you when I needed you?

PAUL

Art critics critique because they, themselves, can't paint. Because if they could, they'd see that there is no reason for an art critic. Your truth is not the critic's truth. Your truth will come forth when you start focusing more on your work than what others *think* of your work.

HUGH

What is it you do? I'm not real clear on...

PAUL

It is imperative you understand that art is a process. A process that requires study, preparation, concentration and a willingness to focus on doing all that is necessary to attain that vision with which the artist has set forth.

(Beat.)

HUGH

Are you high?

PAUL

You must work on balance. Creating visual weight. Be it symmetrical or asymmetrical.

HUGH

So you're a teacher. Right?

PAUL

Allowing your work through lines, shapes and color to be pleasing to the eye. An atmosphere of continuity, harmony, movement and flow that will give it a sense of rhythm.

(Hugh pulls out his most recent painting.)

It's a start. Put it this way, it's better than the garbage that was on display.

HUGH

At this point, I'll take that as a compliment.

PAUL

Don't. But it's your work ethic that's of paramount concern. Without it, you'll fall back and rely on your bad habits of lazy, poor execution and painting with a dead hand which results in inferior work.

HUGH

(smirking)

A dead hand? You've got to be kidding.

PAUL

You find this funny?

HUGH

No, it's just... there's a lot of pressure here.

(Paul backs Hugh up to his easel as he stalks him.)

PAUL

You don't know pressure. The pressure of having to execute a painting and sell it because you haven't any money to feed or clothe your family. The pressure of your peers who are doing magnificent, ground breaking work, and you are drowning in inferior, mediocre work. That's a pressure you'll never understand unless you are trapped in its web and forced to find your way out. *(beat)* I don't see the dedication, commitment and devotion. I know it when I see it, and I don't see it in you. Not now.

(Paul exits.)

HUGH

(calling to him)

If not now, when? Hey. Hey!

(Hugh grabs his binoculars and hurries to the window, scanning the streets.)

I wonder if he works for the F.B.I. and was told to round up all the shitty painters.

(Hugh puts away the binoculars. His landline phone rings. Diane's voice is heard on his phone machine. The message morphs into one big cacophony of messages.)

DIANE (V.O.)

Instagram! Hi, there. I hope I'm not calling too late. I was thinking I probably could have taken some photos and Instagrammed them to everyone. That would have helped.

(Hugh gets out three water bottles from the refrigerator and places them downstage right.)

DIANE (V.O.)

I think that's how it works. I mean, I really think that it could have been my not Tweeting or linking to everyone but photos is where it's at. People look at photos. They connect with them easier than words.

(He then gets three more water bottles for downstage left.)

DIANE (V.O.)

There's also some sort of tumbling thing I'm going to check into as well. That's what everyone responds to now. Those type of things. That's how we communicate mostly it seems. I mean, if you had a cell phone I probably would have texted this message. So...

(Hugh takes his flashlight and screwdriver and goes to the light switch by the door. He slowly begins to loosen the screws on the switch plate.)

DIANE (V.O.)

...just don't let what happened at your opening affect you. I don't think I prepared social media things enough. On a side note, and I hate to even ask this, but did you by chance find the small red mat? I think I left it on top of my car and drove off.

(Hugh grabs the red mat and throws it into the closet. He takes the bottles that were on the mat and puts them on the shelf. He gets the laser and begins measuring.)

DIANE (V.O.)

Hopefully it fell off into a gutter miles away from there. Never to be seen again.

(Hugh replaces the painting on the easel with one that has more color and moves the easel near the stage left window. He grabs his art cart and rolls it next to the easel.)

DIANE (V.O.)

(trying to be upbeat)

Okay. I just wanted to hear your voice and I got your phone machine. Let's talk down the line about another showing? Hope you're sleeping.

(He shuts off the message.)

(MORNING FADES UP)

(Hugh stops and stares at what he's been trying to paint. He sits.)

HUGH

Balance and rhythm? What the hell was he talking about? I'm thinking more of his theories than of just painting.

(The doorbell BUZZES.)

Perfect!

(He throws down the palette and brush.)

Let's get little mister painter-know-it-all up here and see how great he is with a brush!

(Hugh presses the button on the buzzer and yells into the hall.)

Hey, at least this time you pressed the buzzer. Now get your ass up here!

(He walks back to the easel.)

Let's go! Get in here, hotshot! Now that you got my head all screwed up, let's see what kind of work *you* can do under "pressure!"

(A timid Maris enters carrying her purse and two coffees. Hugh freezes.)

MARIS

Is this a bad time?

HUGH

No. No. No. That wasn't directed at you. I thought it was someone else.

MARIS

I thought I'd drop by unannounced on my break and share some coffee with you as a peace offering seeing how you had to suffer through "Hurricane Asshole."

HUGH

I weathered the storm. Plus for all that hot air he wasn't that far off.

(She hands him a coffee.)

Thank you.

(Hugh takes a sip.)

Wow, some coffee that's actually hot. But I must say that it's just not the same without a shot of paint.

MARIS

(laughing)

I like my varnish in the morning as well.

(She walks over to a painting on the wall.)

But seriously, who the hell is Michael to judge or criticize anyone? I'd love to see the paintings he did. I'm sure that they were worse than yours.

(Hugh walks over and stands in front of the painting, blocking her view.)

HUGH

Only a fool would accept a backhanded compliment like that. So, thank you.

(He tips his coffee as a toast.)

MARIS

No, I didn't mean... Not that your paintings are bad or worse than anyone else's... they're not... worse.

HUGH

You've seen worse?

MARIS

Absolutely.

(He takes the painting off the wall, turns it upside down and puts it back on the wall.)

HUGH

You could turn this anyway you want and no one would know which way is right.

MARIS

Some could say the same about Rothko.

HUGH

You *feel* Rothko. You don't *feel* this.

MARIS

Do you have any examples of paintings you've done that you like?

(Hugh turns and stares at her. He walks slowly over to the couch and sits contemplating her question.)

I'm sorry. Did I say something... I honestly just wanted to come back and apologize for Michael and because I felt bad that you felt I thought your work was horrible. (*beat*) I also brought more examples of my brother's work. In case you... (*beat*) maybe another time?

HUGH

No. Let's have a look. I want to see them.

(Maris walks over and sits next to Hugh. He gets up and grabs two water bottles from the refrigerator and places one on either side of them.)

MARIS

Thank you.

(She picks up the bottle and takes a sip. Hugh goes back to the refrigerator, gets another bottle and replaces that bottle.)

One is enough. Thank you.

(Hugh grabs the vase of flowers and places them on the platform near her.)

(Maris pulls out a small photo album from her purse and hands it to Hugh.)

HUGH

Wow. These are impressive. The urban downtown thing. The telephone poles. Nice.

MARIS

I love his sketches. His paintings are so different.

(She moves closer as they look at the illustrations together.)

HUGH

Cars at night. This is great. (*sees his portrait*) Is this what he looked like?

MARIS

Yeah. He only did a couple self portraits. But that one really captures his essence.

HUGH

Wow.

MARIS

After he died I ran off some copies and signed, numbered, and framed them. I tried selling them to anyone interested. I knew they were good, I guess I needed that validation for him. That's what got me into doing what I do now.

HUGH

Let me guess, you sold one to The Prince of Darkness himself?

MARIS

Actually, he bought several. And not long after that I started working for him. And trust me, it is just work. (*beat*) He can be a nice guy. But I find that Michael is at his best when taken in small doses.

HUGH

Kind of like aspirin.

MARIS

Exactly. So, tell me about Woodbury. You said you went there for awhile.

HUGH

Yeah. I did. It's a good school.

MARIS

What was it like? What was your experience there?

(Hugh hands it back to her.)

HUGH

Thanks for the coffee.

MARIS

Sure.

(He stands up and walks over to his easel and stares at his painting.)

Was it a good thing?

HUGH

(suspicious)

Why do you want to know? Is this just being "curious?"

MARIS

No. It's because my brother went there. And I know nothing about his experience or that time in his life. That's all.

(She takes her coffee and photo album and walks to the door.)

HUGH

It was good for the first couple years.

(She stops and turns back.)

HUGH

I was dedicated. I learned a lot. They helped me develop my style. (*beat*) Then... my life went into another direction. And I left. Or... was asked to leave.

MARIS

Okay.

(Awkward silence. She walks up next to him and looks at his painting.)

Well, if this gives you some joy and peace of mind, that's all that matters.

(Her phone rings.)

I'm sorry.

(She answers.)

No. Do not come... Do not! I'm on my way. Now. I'm on my way now.

(She hangs up.)

I've got to go before he comes up here.

(She stands in front of him.)

Everyone has potential. If you love it, keep painting. Don't let anything get in the way.

(She touches his shoulder and hurries toward the exit.)

HUGH

Maris.

(She stops. Hugh grabs her water and hands it to her.)

My reminding you of your brother...

MARIS

(smiles)

It's a good thing.

(She exits. Hugh hurries to the window and watches her below.)

HUGH

Potential. My work has potential, doesn't it? It does and it can and it did and it will. I need balance.

(He places another water bottle by the one downstage center. He grabs the spritzer bottle and sprays the radiator.)

The positive with the negative.

(Hugh begins spraying water near the electrical appliances.)

Gases and electricity. Hot and cold.

(He walks over and sprays the light switch near the entrance and then sprays himself.)

Rhythm! Balance and rhythm!

(He puts the bottle down and moves the easel and the painting stage right. He rolls his art cart to the easel along with his chair.)

With a little color and the proper composition could just add up to a little potential!

(He TURNS ON the CD PLAYER and out BLASTS the MUSIC. He dances and sings to the music then quickly begins to paint.)

(Walking up the stairs and into the loft is Paul. With him is PAUL'S FRIEND, slight, short beard, overcoat. They stop upon entering and shudder at the sound of the music. They move closely behind Hugh to see what he is painting. Hugh turns to see Paul.)

HUGH

Shit!

(He then sees Paul's friend.)

Shit!!

(Hugh turns OFF the MUSIC.)

PAUL

What in God's name was that sound?

HUGH

Dude!

PAUL

And judging by the sweet smell of turpentine, you have started without us.

HUGH

What is with you?!

PAUL

Have you thought about what we discussed?

HUGH

You've got to quit sneaking up on me!

PAUL

Were we sneaking?

(Paul's friend shakes his head and grabs a painting off the wall.)

PAUL

I didn't think so either. We came in, presuming to be your guests, and strolled over to you. Nothing sneaky about that. Because you were looking away doesn't mean we were sneaking.

HUGH

How did you get in here?

PAUL

Through the door, of course.

HUGH

It was open?

PAUL

I would characterize it as "ajar."

HUGH

Ajar. So because it was "ajar" you felt you could just walk in to a stranger's apartment?

PAUL

Sir, you are hardly a stranger. In fact, I would consider you somewhat of an acquaintance.

You would? HUGH

Yes. (*beat*) I'm Paul. PAUL

Paul? HUGH

Yes, we've met before. PAUL

Before, before? HUGH

Before before? Before what before? PAUL

Before now. HUGH

As in previously? PAUL

Yes. HUGH

Prior to before? PAUL

I think. HUGH

Do you not recognize me? PAUL

That's why I'm asking you. HUGH

Then the answer to your question is we've met before. PAUL

So we *have* met before? HUGH

PAUL

Before the present. Of course. *(beat)* You've made me dizzy.

(Paul sits as his friend digs into some crackers on the shelf.)

HUGH

And who's the criminal mime behind you?

PAUL

I take offense to that comment, sir. We have only the most honorable of intentions. So, please, show him some respect.

(Paul slaps his friend's hand for stealing crackers.)

This happens to be a dear friend... when we get along.

(Paul's friend walks over, picks up another painting and looks closely.)

HUGH

And does your "dear friend" talk and have a name?

PAUL

He can and does.

HUGH

And why did you bring him?

PAUL'S FRIEND

Pardon my "friend's" impolite lack of decency in not introducing me.

PAUL

He called you a criminal mime. I defended you, and you have the lack of decency to say I have a lack of decency?

PAUL'S FRIEND

It's cute how you mix words around, but after a while it gets boring... like your artwork. I believe I too can assist you, sir. With the help of Paul's direction, *if* need be.

(Paul crosses to his friend and looks back to Hugh.)

PAUL

We have decided that, in unison, we both want to counsel you.

HUGH

It takes two of you to do that? Is my work that bad?

PAUL'S FRIEND

It is.

PAUL

It is.

(Paul's friend hands Paul the painting. He walks over, picks up the vase of flowers, drinks some of the water, places the flowers back into the vase and up on the shelf.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Paul was absolutely correct in recruiting my skills. We are still convinced you have great potential.

HUGH

Still? Potential?

PAUL

Pardon?

HUGH

(to Paul)

You said "potential."

PAUL

(pointing to Paul's friend)

He said potential. I didn't.

PAUL'S FRIEND

What did I say?

PAUL

Something about potential.

HUGH

(to Paul's friend)

Did you talk to Maris?

PAUL'S FRIEND

Who's Maris?

PAUL

Across the street?

So you did talk to her?
HUGH

We don't know Maris.
PAUL'S FRIEND

Then how did you know she was across the street?
HUGH

Maris?
PAUL

Yes.
HUGH

She *is* across the street, is she not?
PAUL

Yes, she is, so how do you know her?
HUGH

Who?
PAUL'S FRIEND

Maris.
HUGH

The one across the street.
PAUL
(to Paul's friend)

Tall?
PAUL'S FRIEND

Yes.
HUGH

Blonde?
PAUL'S FRIEND

That's her.
HUGH

Across the street?
PAUL'S FRIEND

Exactly.
HUGH

We don't know her.
PAUL'S FRIEND
(irritated)

Shall we get started?
PAUL

We shall.
PAUL'S FRIEND

Let's have a look.
PAUL

(They look at various paintings they feel are horrible. They take those paintings and toss them into the closet. They quite like the splattered paint on the bathroom curtain. They find a painting that causes a heated dispute.)

PAUL
I disagree. In fact, I couldn't disagree with you more.

(Paul walks up to Hugh.)

His style is more conducive to say... Cezanne.

PAUL'S FRIEND
Cezanne?! Cezanne?! How do you come to such a preposterous, moronic conclusion?! You blurted his name out just to antagonize me!

PAUL
I didn't blurt out the name Cezanne!

PAUL'S FRIEND
You did it again! You know that I'm repulsed by his style, and suggesting that this novice follow such an absurdly ludicrous technique is appallingly irresponsible.

HUGH

Hey guys.

PAUL

The only thing appallingly irresponsible is your reaction to such a brilliant suggestion as... Cezanne!

PAUL'S FRIEND

You bastard! I shall fight ignorance with intelligence! The decision regarding this man's style warrants more of an approach such as... say... Signac! Or Seurat!

PAUL

Signac or Seurat?!!

HUGH

Easy. Calm down.

PAUL

Such a vile, uneducated suggestion! You dare propose such an incompetent approach as Pointillism? You can't be serious!?! This is just because you revere Signac and Seurat! That's the only reason you would try and thrust such a technique on this floundering artist! Pointillism! I am disgusted by the idea!

(Paul spits on the floor in disgust. Paul's friend does the same. Paul follows with another spit. Paul's friend tries to hock up a loogie.)

HUGH

No! No! No!

PAUL'S FRIEND

You find it difficult to swallow your own medicine?!

HUGH

I'm not sure what's going on....

PAUL

I'll tell you! All pointillism is, is a meticulous form of embroidery on canvas. It's best suited for cushion covers!

PAUL'S FRIEND

I defy you to force upon him the style of the so-called 'artist' you have suggested!

PAUL

You mean, Cezanne!

PAUL'S FRIEND

Stop! Stop blurting out his name! His timid, conscientious, parallel brush strokes looked as if he was trying to come up with some idiosyncratic method just to stand out and distance himself from the rest. He is a fraud!

PAUL

A fraud?!!

HUGH

He doesn't mean fraud.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Yes I do.

PAUL

You have the gall to taunt me with such a word as fraud?!

(Paul grabs Hugh and walks him downstage.)

PAUL

There are many landscapes of Cezanne's that, like his contemporaries, suggest an outpouring of warmth, intimacy, and captivating charm.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Captivating charm?! (*points to Hugh*) Maybe to an inexperienced loser like him.

HUGH

Loser?

PAUL

Cezanne has sold more paintings than...

PAUL'S FRIEND

An artist's worth is not predicated upon his sales!

PAUL

You'd better hope not.

(Paul's friend lunges toward Paul. Hugh jumps in to stop him.)

HUGH

Take it easy! Stop!

PAUL'S FRIEND

You hate Seurat because he converted Pissarro, your so-called hero, to pointillism!!

HUGH

Guys.

PAUL'S FRIEND

There, I said it!

PAUL

You have stepped over the line by bringing up personal information in front of some beginner. Where are your manners, man?!

HUGH

Beginner?

PAUL

Have the decency to conduct yourself as a professional! Not that you have ever been considered as such!

HUGH

Can we focus on...

PAUL'S FRIEND

Quiet, amateur! I'll handle this!

(He walks toward Paul who readies himself for a fight.)

Truth be told, I try more and more to be myself, caring relatively little whether people approve or disapprove.

(He grabs Hugh and walks him over to the couch.)

What am I in the eyes of most people? A nonentity? An eccentric or an unpleasant person, somebody who has no position in society and never will have: in short, the lowest of the low?

(He sits on the platform and pulls Hugh down with him.)

All right, then, even if that were true, then I should one day like to show by my work what such an eccentric, such a nobody, has in his heart. That is my ambition, based less on resentment than on love, in spite of everything, based more on a feeling of serenity than on passion. Though I am often in the depths of misery, there is still calmness, pure harmony and music inside me. I see paintings or drawings in the poorest communities, in the dirtiest neighborhoods.

And my mind is driven towards these things with an irresistible momentum. *(beat)* I put my heart and soul into my work and have lost my mind in the process!

PAUL

No question there.

PAUL'S FRIEND

I would rather die of passion than of boredom!

PAUL

Either way is fine by me. God knows it couldn't happen soon enough.

(Paul's friend gets up and lunges to Paul. Hugh intercepts and keeps them apart.)

HUGH

Obviously years of animosity, and, of course, it had to come out here tonight.

(Beat.)

PAUL

Sir, speaking for myself, I would like to apologize for my behavior.

PAUL'S FRIEND

As well you should.

(Paul's friend enters the closet.)

PAUL

And while some here are more adult than others, how about we focus on the task at hand?

HUGH

Yes, please, help the "floundering, novice, amateur, loser."

PAUL

That was meant in no fashion to ridicule your talents. Merely being accurate in regards to your status.

HUGH

Thank you... I think. Now can we focus on *my* work?

PAUL

Excellent. We'll work on your style, balance and rhythm as we move forward.

(Hugh walks over to the card table and sets out some paint. Paul walks over to the closet to coax his friend out.)

Why don't we start by choosing and mixing the proper colors? We'll begin the process with the background.

(The closet door opens slightly.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Cezanne!

PAUL

Signac or Seurat!

(The closet door closes.)

HUGH

Stop.

PAUL

Fine. I'm going to ignore his neurotic incapability of tolerating disagreements.

(The closet door opens again.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

And I'll ignore your idiotic, neurotic, incapability of choosing between inferior and superior artists.

(The closet door closes.)

HUGH

You're like children.

PAUL

I can't entertain your disrespectful, uncouth comments because I'm busy helping pick out a color. So let us choose a color, shall we?

(The closet door opens.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

(mocking)

"Let us choose a color, shall we?"

PAUL

Here, let's start with red. A nice vermilion red.

PAUL'S FRIEND

(leaning out of the closet)

Why red?

PAUL

It's a choice.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Why not yellow? Yellow is a choice. A nice Cadmium yellow?

PAUL

For the sky?

PAUL'S FRIEND

Red for the sky?

PAUL

It's what Hugh wants to see.

HUGH

Hey, I didn't choose...

PAUL

(covering Hugh's mouth)

It was his choice.

(Paul's friend walks out of the closet to the table.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

He just said he never chose anything.

PAUL

If you were paying attention and not sniveling, you would have seen him point to a color. And that color was red.

HUGH

Wait, I didn't...

PAUL'S FRIEND

You want red because you use red more than any other color. You are insufferable when it comes to red!

PAUL

And you're not when it comes to yellow? Dear God, can we see a different color landscape from you that doesn't highlight yellow?!

PAUL'S FRIEND

There is no blue without yellow!

PAUL

Who's talking about blue?! I'm talking about red! And why not use red? It's the color you used most in the only painting you've sold.

PAUL'S FRIEND

You have the audacity to throw my one and only sale in my face?! As if that were my only measure of merit!

(Paul's friend retreats behind the plastic bathroom curtain.)

PAUL

(to Hugh)

Welcome to my world. What a delight to have him around. I shared a house with him for a couple of months and I wanted to put a knife in my heart!

(Paul's friend opens the curtain.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Why, so you could finally see the true color of red?!

(Paul grabs a paint brush and advances toward his friend.)

PAUL

Better that I put a knife in your back to finally see the true color of yellow!

(The scuffle begins. Hugh grabs the spritzer water bottles and squirts them both. They stop.)

HUGH

If you can't put your differences aside and act like the professional artists you claim to be, then get the hell out and don't come back. Understood?

(Beat.)

PAUL

Again, sir, I state my apologies to you... and... to my... dear friend.

(Hugh looks at Paul's friend who crosses to Paul and holds out his hand. When Paul reaches to shake, his friend pulls his hand away.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Burn in hell, nitwit.

(Paul, livid, tries to control himself.)

HUGH

Good enough. Now, can we get to work?

PAUL

Let's choose yellow.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Red is fine by me.

PAUL

Now red is fine? Why is red now suddenly your preferred choice of color?!

PAUL'S FRIEND

Because, obviously yellow represents the color of bile that emanates from your every pore when your precious "red" isn't chosen!

HUGH

(spritzing)

Stop it! Enough!

(They stop arguing.)

Both of you shut up and help me paint. That's all I'm asking. You offered and I accepted. So let's just go with yellow. Okay? Yellow.

PAUL

Nothing we haven't seen before in certain menial landscapes, but, yellow it is.

HUGH

So, how do I change my technique, if that's what's needed?

PAUL

Excellent question. We'll get you on track. I think we need to guide you in the right direction that will enable you to acquire a new and more contemporary technique.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Ah. Ah. Ah. No. No. No. Do not get locked into the mentality of attempting to procure a technique. You don't need to try to acquire anything. It's already in you.

PAUL

I said we'll *guide* him to the technique.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Guide him where? To where his technique already lies? Within his soul?

PAUL

It was merely a suggestion. An educated suggestion, might I add.

PAUL'S FRIEND

I suggest you keep your suggestions to yourself and do not quench his inspiration and imagination by trying to *guide* him. Let him have the conviction and courage to venture forth knowing that the answer will be waiting for him at the end of that journey. *(to Hugh)* What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything like that? Answer. It would be like Paul's life.

PAUL

Talk about courage? Two fucking months I spent with him! It was a sixty day lobotomy!!

HUGH

(spritzing them)

Enough!! Both of you! Enough! Focus.

PAUL

Fine. I think you should try and show how the landscape is interesting to you. It will be unique to you and no one else. Don't just paint...

PAUL'S FRIEND

Feel. Feel the emotion of the landscape. Find the balance and rhythm within the emotion of the landscape.

(Hugh starts to paint.)

That's it. And don't be afraid to attack this piece with excessive paint.

PAUL

Excessive paint?

PAUL'S FRIEND

Allow the texture from your brush to merge and become part of the scene you are creating.

PAUL

There is the theory, Hugh, of some lesser qualified artists, that more paint gives you the appearance of more movement. I disagree. An accomplished painter can show movement within the composition with the slightest of brush strokes.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Interesting. Here's an idea. How about some "*lesser qualified artist*", with the "*slightest*" kick, puts his boot up your ass?

HUGH

Mix!! Join me, guys! I want to mix some colors!

PAUL'S FRIEND

Absolutely! Mix! Feel free to mix colors!

PAUL

Your originality is your own! People will look at your work and know instantly that it is yours!

PAUL'S FRIEND

Precisely! It will never leave you. It will thrive within your work, and, for better or for worse, it will remain as your trademark!

(Hugh grabs a handful of paints and puts them on his palette. Paul smiles at Paul's friend. They nod at each other.)

(Walking up into the room, unnoticed, is Diane. She sees more water bottles.)

HUGH

It seems the more simply I perceive my vision, the more simply I transpose that vision.

PAUL'S FRIEND

That's it! Simplicity is key!

PAUL

And composition. Always think composition!

HUGH

I will. Composition is everything.

PAUL'S FRIEND

But don't forget, instinct is first and foremost!

HUGH

I've got it! I feel it!

PAUL

Look me in the eyes, Hugh!

(Hugh looks over at Paul.)

That's it! That look! It's back!!

DIANE

Hugh.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Do you feel it?! Do you remember?

HUGH

Yes, it's coming back to me! It's like it never left!

PAUL

Because it never did!

HUGH

You're right! My instinct, the composition, and the simplicity is back!

DIANE

Hugh!

(Hugh, Paul, and Paul's friend all freeze and look at Diane.)

(Beat.)

Who are you talking to?

(Hugh stays frozen but his eyes dart slightly to Paul and Paul's friend then back to Diane.)

DIANE

There's no one here.

(Lights bump off. End of Act 1)

ACT 2

The curtain rises. Diane and Hugh are in the same positions. Paul and Paul's Friend are gone. Hugh ends the silence.

HUGH

What are you doing here?

DIANE

Who were you talking to?

(Beat. Hugh glances to his side for Paul and Paul's friend.)

HUGH

I was talking out loud. Do you have a problem with that? Is that a crime? It seems the only crime is you barging in here without letting me know you were coming. It's my place and I want my privacy so I can do my work. So I want my key back.

(Diane stares at him. Finally...)

I was talking out loud.

DIANE

No. You were having a conversation.

HUGH

No. No, I was not. I was... reminding myself of balance and rhythm. I was trying not to focus too much on my technique and yet trying to use my instinct to bring my balance and rhythm into play as I execute this piece.

(He turns back to the easel and sees Paul and his friend are gone.)

DIANE

Hugh.

HUGH

So, now that you have fuck-shuied the balance and rhythm of this whole room, and my creativity has flowed out the God damn window, what is it that you want, Diane? Why did you come here?

DIANE

I know how much I screwed up your opening. I thought an opening would be good for you...

HUGH

Well, stop thinking about what's good for me, okay? Stop. I'm through with you trying to help me in my life. Or trying to control my life.

DIANE

Control? I just came by because I called and you didn't pick up your phone and I was worried what you might be going through. What you might be... thinking. And then I walk in and you were... talking... and... there was no one there.

HUGH

And I said I was talking out loud. Haven't you ever talked to yourself out loud?

DIANE

Yes.

(Hugh takes the painting off the easel and files it with the others.)

HUGH

So because you've talked to yourself out loud does that mean you have some sort of mental issue? Because if that's true you should get to a shrink! Get on the internet! Go to www.Imsofuckedupinthehead.com! Spill your guts to a certified psychologist. That's what I did with you. I'm sure you can find someone who is guaranteed to be as screwed up in the head as you. Let them examine, research, and come to the final conclusion as to just why it is you talk to yourself out loud! What are you afraid of, Diane?

DIANE

I'm afraid for you. I know exactly what is going on, Hugh.

HUGH

Then why don't you enlighten me, Di. Tell me exactly what you think is going on.

(Beat.)

DIANE

You're off your medication.

(They stare at each other. Finally...)

HUGH

You don't know what the hell you're talking about.

DIANE

Really?

HUGH

Here you go again with your half ass diagnosis without any basis. Without any...

DIANE

You can deceive anybody else but me. I see right through you.

HUGH

Really, right through me?

(He puts his hand behind his back and flips her off.)

Tell me how many fingers I'm holding up behind my back.

DIANE

You're off your meds. That's why I came here. I could feel it. What do you think of that, Hugh? I could "feel" that you are off your meds.

HUGH

Case in point. Wackjob off her meds! Mainline her with downers, stat! And while you're at it, give her a colonic because she's full of shit.

DIANE

You want to talk shit? I can talk shit. Because I lived through three years of all your shit. And I see it all throughout this room. So don't tell me I don't know shit. You need help, Hugh. I'm not the enemy. All I ever gave a "shit" about was that you were okay. And right now, you're not okay.

HUGH

Based on what? My talking out loud?! That's part of my creative process! I talk out loud! So the fuck what?! Uh oh, he talked out loud. He must be crazy again! Call the medication police! Shove more pills down his throat! You have no right to come into my place and make these outrageous accusations regarding my mental state! Who the fuck are you?! You've got nothing else going on in your life so you spend your time dredging up old memories and fears of the past that have nothing to do with the present! *My* present! I don't need to pee in your hypothetical cup to prove anything! So piss off!

(He walks away from her. She walks downstage to a water bottle and tips it over with her foot. Hugh looks. They stare at each other.)

(Diane walks across the room to another bottle and kicks it over. Hugh is trying to hide his agitation.)

DIANE

What?

(Hugh looks at both bottles then back to her.)

HUGH

What's your point?

(Diane walks to another bottle and picks it up.)

It's time for you to leave.

(She holds the bottle over her head to throw. He sprints toward her and grabs it out of her hand.)

That does nothing to me! You're just trying to agitate me!

(Hugh goes over to every bottle that has been moved and tries to replace them in their original spots.)

So get the hell out of here and leave me alone.

(Diane watches as he struggles to find the exact spots.)

You don't know what the hell you're talking about!

(Diane opens the refrigerator. Water bottles fill the shelves. She uncovers several other 'hiding' spots in the room that are filled with bottles.)

DIANE

Hugh, please, get back on your medication.

(She exits.)

(Hugh is visibly shaken as he scans the unbalanced room. He's near tears.)

HUGH

Now look!

(He shuts the refrigerator and hides all the exposed hidden bottles. He hurries and gets out the laser.)

Balance.

(He grabs his spritzer bottle and sprays the radiator.)

Positive and negative. It was all balanced until she showed up.

(He grabs his screwdriver and unscrews the plate to a wall switch. He smells the switch for the gases. He scans the room.)

That should have balanced it, right? Fuck.

(He grabs his canvas, easel and art cart and brings them upstage center. He grabs his palette and brush and tries to paint. He can't. He throws them down.)

(He grabs the can of turpentine and a rag to wipe off the painting. He drops the rag and stares at the can.)

No. Please. No. Don't. Come on!

(He looks frantically around the room, analyzing what surrounds him. He takes the turpentine and walks away from the easel. He collapses to the floor staring at the can.)

No. No.

(As Hugh opens the top of the turpentine and brings the can to his lips, Paul and Paul's friend, with a bandage on his left ear, come bursting out of the refrigerator and rush toward him SCREAMING. Hugh curls up in the fetal position.)

(Paul and Paul's friend's laugh then recognize his torment and despair.)

PAUL

You're shaking.

PAUL'S FRIEND
(looking closely at Hugh)

I don't like your color.

PAUL

He *is* a little pale, isn't he? Did we catch you at a bad time? Should we leave?

HUGH

No. (*beat*) Please. Don't. I just...

PAUL'S FRIEND

What is it?

(*Beat.*)

HUGH

I didn't think you'd be coming back.

PAUL

You what?

PAUL'S FRIEND

Ridiculous.

PAUL

Why would you think that?

HUGH

I just felt like I was... back on my own, again.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Left to fend for yourself?

PAUL

Would we do that?

HUGH

You do have a tendency to suddenly be gone. Not be here when I need you.

PAUL

(to Paul's friend)

He sounds like my ex-wife.

PAUL'S FRIEND

I heard she was like that.

PAUL

Christ, she never stopped nagging. Why do you think I ended up in Tahiti?

(Paul pulls out a bowl of island fruit and offers it to his friend.)

Mango?

(Paul and his friend take a piece. Paul places down the bowl.)

Be that as it may, you have to trust us.

PAUL'S FRIEND

That's the word! Trust. Let's get you up.

(They stand Hugh up.)

HUGH

I'm hot. Are you hot? It's hot in here.

(Paul's friend grabs the spray bottle and begins spritzing Hugh, then Paul, who becomes agitated. Hugh takes the bottle and sprays the electrical appliances in the room.)

Balance the positive and negative. Gasses and electricity. Hot and cold.

PAUL

(pointing to a socket)

You missed a spot.

HUGH

Thanks.

(Hugh sprays the spot.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Do you really need to keep spraying, or can we just paint?

(Hugh sees the bandage on Paul's friend's ear.)

HUGH

What happened to you?

PAUL'S FRIEND

Don't ask. Big mistake.

(Paul looks over at the painting on the easel.)

PAUL

What have we got here?

(He brings the easel to the center of the room.)

Is this the painting we started together?

PAUL'S FRIEND

That's not our painting. In fact, if I had to venture a guess, I'd say it looks more like a painting of Cezanne's.

PAUL

Do you want to go there?

PAUL'S FRIEND

I'm just saying.

PAUL

Do you want to go there?

PAUL'S FRIEND

A simple observation.

(Paul sees the can of turpentine in Hugh's hand.)

PAUL

You weren't going to drink that turpentine, were you?

PAUL'S FRIEND

Not without a toast, I hope!

(Paul's friend grabs the turpentine from Hugh and smells it.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

I'm not adverse to a swig of the nasty, provided it's at the right time.

PAUL

And this, my friend, is not the right time.

(Paul puts the turpentine on the shelf.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

I'll take a rain check. It's there if we need it. And we may.

(Paul's friend leads Hugh back to his chair at the easel.)

PAUL

Exactly. But now we have work to do. We didn't come all this way to leave you on your own! So, with that in mind, we shall *guide* you and persevere with the task at hand!

(Paul's friend accidentally kicks over a bottle. Hugh looks quickly. Paul's friend smiles and picks up the bottles.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Grab your brush and palette!

(Paul's friend dumps the bottles of water in the trash.)

Discard all other methods from your past. Let your instinct take over! A new Hugh for all to view!

(Hugh takes the brush and dips it into the paint. Paul guides his hand.)

PAUL

Focus on tones. Allow the balance of the tones to flow through your brush. Almost like music!

(Hugh layers the color onto the canvas.)

PAUL

That's it!

PAUL'S FRIEND

Exactly!

PAUL

Like an orchestra, we shall create these pieces together!

(PAUL HURRIES OVER TO THE CD PLAYER AND GESTURES AS IF HE IS TURNING THE CRANK OF AN OLD PHONOGRAPH.)

HE DROPS THE NEEDLE AND BEAUTIFUL CLASSICAL MUSIC FILLS THE ROOM.)

(PAUL'S FRIEND WALKS OVER AND GESTURES TO THE PLAYER AS IF HE HAS SHOT THE PHONOGRAPH. THE TUNE CHANGES TO A MORE SOMBER PIECE.)

(PAUL GRABS HUGH'S HAND AND WITH THE GRACE OF A BALLET DANCER, SPINS HIM TOWARD THE CD PLAYER. HUGH HITS THE PLAY BUTTON AND MUSIC SURGES INTO THE ROOM AND BUILDS SLOWLY TO A FEVERED PITCH.)

MONTAGE:

(PAUL AND HIS FRIEND BRING THE OTHER TWO EASELS OUT TO HUGH. THEY BEGIN TO BRING CANVAS AFTER CANVAS THAT HUGH PAINTS TO THE MUSIC.)

(HUGH MOVES ON THROUGH EACH CANVAS IN A FRANTIC, LIGHTNING PACE WITH THE AID OF PAUL AND HIS FRIEND.)

(AS THE MUSIC HITS ITS FRENZIED, MANIACAL CRESCENDO, ALL THREE OF THEM COLLAPSE IN EXHAUSTION.)

(The loft is a mess and alive in vivid colors. Painted canvases are strewn everywhere.)

(The SILENCE is broken by the door BUZZER.)

(They stare at the buzzer.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

That's not that lunatic witch with the stupid red mat, is it?

PAUL

She did seem slightly... unbalanced.

(Hugh approaches the buzzer in a stealth manner.
He finally presses the button.)

HUGH
(cryptic)

Yeah?

MARIS

It's Maris. Is it too late?

(Hugh looks back to Paul and Paul's friend. They
have a quick conference, look at Hugh, and shrug.)

HUGH
(still cryptic)

For what?

MARIS

To come up?

(Hugh looks back at Paul and Paul's friend who give
the maybe/maybe not sign.)

HUGH
(more cryptic)

Why?

MARIS

To see you?

(Paul's friend rushes Hugh and presses the buzzer.)

(Hugh quickly tries to clean up the room. Paul and
Paul's friend straighten each other's clothes for her
arrival.)

(Maris enters the loft.)

Hi. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were... painting.

(She looks around at the room in amazement at the
paintings.)

I saw your light was on... My God.

(She tours the room.)

What happened in here? This is... I mean, this is...

(Paul's friend walks up behind her and smells her hair.)

Astounding.

(She reaches out for Hugh and takes his hands.)

Hugh, what have you done?

HUGH

I've been painting.

MARIS

Yes, you have. You have been painting.

(She walks him over to a red painting on the floor.)

This red painting is...

(Paul runs over next to her to hear what she has to say.)

...remarkable.

(Paul does a victory dance.)

But this yellow one...

(Paul's friend stands up next to her.)

...is amazing, as well.

(Paul's friend does his own dance.)

But look at the composition of this one. The balance of tones. Fantastic!

(Paul and Paul's friend hurry over and stand in front of Hugh's self portrait that Maris has rushed over to see.)

This just might be my favorite.

PAUL'S FRIEND

I'd cut off my right ear for you.

PAUL

You're gonna run out of parts.

MARIS

How did you...? When did you...? Stay here! Okay?

(She hurries toward the exit. Paul follows. He stops as she stops to look back at Hugh.)

Stay.

(She exits.)

PAUL

She really loved our red painting! Do you see what I mean by how it attracts the eye?!

PAUL'S FRIEND

Actually, if you were being attentive, she was taken by the yellow piece even more.

(He picks up the yellow painting and puts it up for display.)

PAUL

I wouldn't say "even more." She said it was amazing "as well." Meaning there was a slight chance she may have liked it, but not as much as the red one.

(Paul picks up the red painting.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

"As much?" She never uttered "as much." But did you see her eyes when she looked at the yellow painting?

PAUL

It's yellow. Of course it's going to bother her eyes.

(Paul places the red painting in front of the yellow one. Paul's friend takes the red painting and throws it down on the floor. Paul gasps.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

It didn't bother her eyes! Far from it! She was smitten by the balance, the tones, and the juxtaposition of color!!

PAUL

(to Hugh)

Dear God, here he goes again.

(Paul takes the red painting, pulls open the bathroom curtain and hides behind it.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

You may not understand my balance and tones but I have always attempted that which isn't commonplace.

(Paul's friend pulls away the curtain to see Paul has vanished.)

And in doing so, forged ahead with eyes wide open...

(Paul's friend opens the refrigerator and doesn't find Paul.)

...willing to blaze mysterious trails that were only known to me!

(Paul pops out of Hugh's closet.)

PAUL

Do you see this? This certain sensibility is what strained my nerves to the point of stifling all human warmth.

MICHAEL (OFFSTAGE)

This better not be a waste of my time!

(All three look toward the stairs. Maris shoves Michael into the room. He stands there taking it all in. Paul and his friend circle around him.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

So, this is the critic.

PAUL

Repulsive! Who do you think you are?!

HUGH
(to Paul and Paul's friend)

Calm down.

MICHAEL
(to Hugh)

Calm down, my ass.

(He stares at all the paintings.)

This is mind fucking blowing.

PAUL'S FRIEND
Precisely. (to Hugh) What does that mean?

(Michael crosses to Hugh's portrait and turns back to Hugh.)

MICHAEL
When the fuck did...? How the fuck...? Fuck.

PAUL
An extremely limited vocabulary.

MARIS
I felt the same way.

PAUL
Because it's the truth.

MICHAEL
All these paintings are yours?

(Hugh nods.)

Since when?

PAUL'S FRIEND
The last few days.

MARIS
The last few days.

MICHAEL
The last few days?!

MARIS

That's right.

PAUL

You don't think he's capable?

MICHAEL

I had no idea you were capable of anything like this. Your last set of work looked like some poorly executed, paint and drip, bullshit. No offense. But this... this work is... stunning. Absolutely incredible. There must be twenty, thirty, paintings here. I could do a whole showing with this work that you've completed in just a few days. A full blown exhibition. Red carpet. Champagne. Media. The works.

HUGH

No balloons.

MICHAEL

What? Couldn't we do this next month?!

MARIS

We're setting up the Gabe Leonard exhibit.

MICHAEL

Fuck that. He's just doing more of that outlaw/desperado bullshit. This is cutting edge! What is your name again?

PAUL'S FRIEND

Hugh.

(Michael walks up to Hugh.)

PAUL

Hugh.

HUGH

Hugh.

MICHAEL

Hugh, never stop painting. Your work is magnificent!

(Paul's friend turns to Hugh.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

(mocking)

Your work is magnificent!

HUGH

Stop mocking.

MICHAEL

I'm not mocking. I'm totally sincere. Your work *is* magnificent.

PAUL

A sudden change of tune.

MICHAEL

(to Maris)

I'm going across the street right now and call Gabe and cancel his ass. Fuck 'em. This is the future of Michael's Gallery!

(Michael starts to leave.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Keep going, you revolting turncoat!

(Michael stops and looks at a painting.)

MICHAEL

I see so many influences in your work. Possibly... Bernard.

PAUL

Bernard?!

PAUL'S FRIEND

Bernard?!

PAUL

You ignoramus! It's appalling you can't see the difference between...

MICHAEL

Maybe Gauguin?

PAUL

Then again, a brilliant deduction, sir! Oui. Oui. Merci beaucoup.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Is that all you see you... "mind... blowing... fuck shit!?"

MICHAEL

But mostly... Van Gogh.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Such wisdom!

(Michael walks to the door. Paul and Paul's friend follow.)

PAUL

Look closer. It's "mostly" Gauguin.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Stop groveling and badgering the man.

PAUL

I'm merely stating the truth.

(Michael exits. Paul's friend rushes to the door.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Why leave so soon? Au revoir, my friend.

(He turns to Paul.)

Adulation of one's art makes the heart soar.

PAUL

Since when?

PAUL'S FRIEND

You're just jealous.

(They see Maris and Hugh embrace.)

PAUL

Uh oh. What do we have here?

(They approach and stand on either side.)

Stay focused, my boy.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Nothing like magnificent work to get the blood flowing.

PAUL

We have work yet to be discovered! There is a time and place for everything.

PAUL'S FRIEND

Agreed. And I know what is going to take *place* at this *time*.

(Paul's friend whispers to Hugh.)

Don't fuck too much. Your paintings will be all the more spermatic.

PAUL

Spermatic? Is that a word?

(Hugh and Maris kiss. Paul's friend looks down at Hugh's crotch.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Too late. The ship has set sail. The moon is on the rise. The horse is out of the barn.

PAUL

Okay, I get it.

PAUL'S FRIEND

The volcano is about to...

PAUL

I said I got it.

(Paul's friend crosses his hands in front of his own crotch, walks over to Paul and they watch Hugh and Maris.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

This could go on all night and we'll just stand here like imbeciles with erections.

PAUL

Speak for yourself.

PAUL'S FRIEND

I am.

(Paul takes a step away.)

(Maris pulls out of the kiss. They stare for a long beat. Hugh guides her slowly and poses her on the couch.)

HUGH

Stay right there.

(Hugh walks back and grabs a new canvas and places it on the easel. He sets up to paint her. Paul's friend and Paul walk over and stand on either of him, watching him work.)

(Hugh watches Maris intently as he picks up his brush. She slowly disrobes.)

PAUL'S FRIEND

Exaggerate the essential. Leave the obvious vague. Respond to what moves you.

PAUL

Think tonal values. Become part of her body. Feel her skin with your brush.

(Hugh holds up his brush to quiet them.)

(He begins to paint. It's as if the painting finishes itself. He stops painting, puts down the brush, and walks over to her. He gestures toward her and she is painted with light. He climbs on the couch. They embrace.)

LIGHTS FADE. MUSIC UP. ATMOSPHERE CHANGES. IT'S MORNING.

(Hugh, Paul's friend and Paul are gone. Maris is still asleep on the couch.)

(Footsteps are heard coming up the stairs. Maris stirs and stretches, trying to wake up.)

MARIS

Good morning.

(Walking into the loft is Diane. She stops at the top of the stairs and sees Maris on the couch. Maris doesn't see her.)

It's like you were possessed last night. (beat) Hugh?

(Maris looks up and sees Diane staring at her.)

Oh my God!

(She grabs the sheet and covers herself. She retreats into the closet to change.)

DIANE

I'm sorry. I had no idea. I'm looking for Hugh.

MARIS

My God, you scared me. How did you get in?

DIANE

I have a key. I was given a key. When he first moved in. So I have a key.

MARIS

Are you his sister, or...

DIANE

I'm Diane.

(Diane, scans the apartment.)

MARIS

Is there some way I can help you?

(Maris comes out of the closet in her dress.)

DIANE

Do you know where Hugh is?

MARIS

I would guess he's probably out getting breakfast.

DIANE

He's not out getting breakfast.

(Diane walks around the loft looking at the paintings.)

MARIS

Wait, aren't you the one who drove off with the red mat on the top of your car? You were here that night and set up his opening.

DIANE

What's your name?

MARIS

Maris. Did he know you were coming over here?

DIANE

What do you know about Hugh?

MARIS

He's talented. Fascinating. And full of surprises.

(Diane sees all the water bottles amongst the paintings. She looks back to Maris.)

DIANE

He's also not well.

MARIS

What does that mean? Not well.

DIANE

Look around. Look at all the bottles placed throughout the room. You don't find that odd?

MARIS

I'm guessing it's all part of his art.

DIANE

All of them must be strategically triangulated to protect the majority of the room.

MARIS

Protect the room? Protect it from what?

DIANE

The harmful gases and radiation that surrounds this room. Can you feel it? Do you smell it? All the poison?

(Diane looks inside the closet.)

MARIS

No. I don't.

DIANE

He does. Because he's off his medication.

(She pulls out something draped with material.)

MARIS

Medication?

DIANE

(takes off material)

Would you like to know what this does?

(She reveals a stand with a water bottle and a hair dryer taped to it. She plugs it in the wall. The dryer blows air onto the bottle. She turns it off.)

Nothing. It does nothing. When I found it in our house one day...

(She walks over to other paintings.)

MARIS

You had a house?

DIANE

He mumbled something to me about the air blowing over the water in the bottle helped cool the atmosphere within the room to set up the proper environment.

(Diane turns the new painting of Maris around.)

Did he sleep here all last night?

MARIS

I fell asleep before he did. So...

DIANE

I'm guessing at some point he left to walk the streets.

(Diane checks the shelves.)

MARIS

The streets?

DIANE

And there's no guarantee he'll come back.

MARIS

What are you talking about?

(Diane takes down the lunch box on the shelf, opens it up and pulls out a full bottle of pills.)

DIANE

His disability pays for everything but it doesn't mean he's going to take them.

(She places the bottle on the shelf.)

MARIS

Disability? Aren't you overreacting? If he's as sick as you say, how can he do this type of work?

DIANE

His collection of art when we met was as good or even better.

MARIS

You still have feelings for him, don't you?

(Beat.)

DIANE

Without his medication he may be gone for days, sometimes weeks. There are no guidelines or rules how someone with an atypical mental condition will behave. Last time he disappeared, he was found with mold all over his body and he ended up in the hospital.

MARIS

Why doesn't he take the medication? Is it because he can't paint?

DIANE

No. It's because he can't paint like *this*.

MARIS

But that's all he talked about last night. How excited he is with what's now happening with his art. It's everything to him. It's what he lives for.

(Hugh comes up the stairwell to the landing, unnoticed.)

DIANE

I'm well aware of his passion and devotion to his art. I lived it for three years. But being obsessed with perfection in his art is what...

HUGH

Are you back to tell me how to live my life, Diane?

(Diane and Maris turn quickly to him.)

(Hugh opens the refrigerator and unloads his backpack of new water bottles inside.)

Try and gain back that control?

(He pulls out a bagel from his backpack and hands it to Maris.)

Good morning. I hope you like cream cheese.

MARIS

Yumm.

(She gives him a kiss and shows Diane the bagel.)

Oh look, breakfast. He brought me breakfast.

DIANE

I found the pills, Hugh. When did you stop taking them?

MICHAEL (OFFSTAGE)

Maris?! You up there?

MARIS

Shit! Michael, wait! I'm coming down!

MICHAEL

Too late! I'm here.

(Michael enters.)

Hey, buddy, looking good! Seriously. I'm not just saying that.

(Michael crosses to Hugh.)

HUGH

I've been up all night. I haven't slept for a few days.

MICHAEL

That's what I'm talking about! You've got that 'wacky, Warhol, somebody-dicked-with-my-hair, kind of look. You are a walking billboard for the future.

Every kid in America is gonna want to copy that crazy-ass, glazed and dazed, fucked-up-in-the-head look. Very hip.

(He turns to Maris.)

Great news, I did it! I told Gabe we're pushing him back to the first of the year. He was bitching and moaning, but I just sold another one of his huge fuckin' Vegas pieces to Manship for way more than it's worth. So be that as it may, now we can exhibit Hugh's work in a month. Maybe two, max. How does that sound, Hugh?! Huh?!

HUGH

Sounds good to me.

MICHAEL

You bet your ass it does! (*looking around*) God damn it, Maris! Let's pick these paintings up off the floor. These pieces are like gold! And Hugh, let's get your list of titles. If you have any with the word 'Dusk' in it, I can sell those fuckers sight unseen.

(Michael pick up the paintings. He looks over and sees the hair dryer contraption.)

What the hell is that? That's kind of cool. You do sculptures as well?

HUGH

Who brought that out?!

MICHAEL

Wasn't me. I just got here. I don't even know what the hell that thing is.

(Michael looks at Diane.)

Are you here to clean this place?

HUGH

This is Diane.

MICHAEL

Diane, let us pick up the paintings first, then you can vacuum or dust or whatever the hell it is you do. And if you're any good, I'm not too thrilled with the gal cleaning my gallery, maybe we can work something out.

MARIS

Michael, she's not the maid.

(Michael stares at the half painted picture of Maris on the easel.)

MICHAEL

Is this you? (*beat*) This is you, isn't it? I'd know the essence of you even in the abstract. (to Hugh) Good job, Hugh. Why didn't you finish it?

(Beat.)

Oh. Oh. Got it. Got it. (*beat*) It's all good. I'm good with it. You must be good with it? Right? I mean, you slept with her. (*beat*) Is she good?

MARIS

Michael.

MICHAEL

Text me later. (*to Maris*) Let's focus on picking up the rest of these gems, get them across the street, let Hugh begin on new ones and let her start cleaning this pigsty.

(Michael gathers up the paintings.)

HUGH

Michael, Diane is a friend.

MICHAEL

Cool. The gal that cleans my condo, Jenara, she's like family to me. I don't trust her with my silverware, but we're very close.

MARIS

Diane isn't here to clean.

MICHAEL

How about I give you fifty bucks?

(Beat.)

What? Sixty?

DIANE

Hugh is sick.

HUGH

Diane.

MICHAEL

Sick? Is that why you're not cleaning anything?

(Michael puts down the paintings like they has some sort of disease and covers his mouth.)

Is it contagious?

DIANE

No. But he's very sick.

HUGH

Diane, this is none of your business.

MICHAEL

You've got cancer?! Shit! Time frame wise, what do you think? It would help if you could make it to the opening.

HUGH

I don't have cancer.

MICHAEL

Oh, well what the hell is it? Shingles. Lyme disease?

(He turns to Maris.)

Chlamydia?

DIANE

He has a mental illness.

(Beat.)

MICHAEL

What fuckin' artist *doesn't* have a mental illness?! No offense, hon, but if that's true, he's in good company. Think about it. Pollock, Munch, Lautrec, Kusama. Christ, the list goes on and on. *(beat)* Actually, it's probably a good thing. Gives your work the "X" factor, if you know what I mean. "He's a fuckin' nut bag and he did all this?!" We'll get the "Ooohs and aaahhs" and we'll sell your work like iPhones.

(He continues picking up paintings.)

DIANE

It's an illness and he needs to be back on his medication.

MICHAEL

What do you mean “back on his medication”?!

HUGH

You have no say in this, Diane.

DIANE

It would help decrease the abnormal activity in...

HUGH

“Abnormal activity?” So you want me to be normal? Take those meds to be like everyone else? Smooth away the edges? Straighten out the curves? Round out the sharp jagged points? All those things are part of me. I wasn’t smooth to begin with. I always had odd curves. And I like my sharp jagged points.

DIANE

You’re not understanding the implications or the severity of being off...

HUGH

You’re not understanding what it feels like to be *on* that poison! I became a rounded, straight, smooth ball that rolled along and plunged head first into the depths of normality. Where everyone around me was “normal.” And when we looked into each others eyes, my reflection was their reflection. I was as flatlined as they were. I don’t ever want to be that “normal” again.

MARIS

Diane thinks if Hugh took the medication...

MICHAEL

Let *me* talk to the cleaning lady.

DIANE

I am *not* his cleaning lady!

MICHAEL

Then who the hell are you? Who did you talk to to have this type of information about his mental health?

DIANE

I’m Hugh’s ex-fiancee.

(Maris is stunned.)

MICHAEL

Well, that's some great fucking credential! Your ex-fiancee?! No animosity there! Hugh was going to marry me but the bastard changed his mind so he must be screwed up in the head, and so my medical diagnosis, of which I have no background, would be to put the poor son of a bitch on medication.

DIANE

For your information, I have a medical background. I was with Hugh for three years. That's not including the six months we spent at the hospital in the medium care unit where we met.

MICHAEL

Excuse me, but I don't think one patient should be suggesting what medication another patient should be taking. And please, no offense, but my initial impression was you looked a little screwy. Like your eyes are too close together or something.

DIANE

I was not a patient at the hospital. I was studying to be a clinical psychologist when we first met at the clinic. I was able to monitor and consult closely with his case worker on the regulating of his medication.

MICHAEL

Whooh, whooh, whooh. You were *working* at the hospital when you first met him?

DIANE

That's correct.

MICHAEL

Hang that ethical diploma on the wall.

DIANE

We didn't become intimate until after he was discharged.

MICHAEL

Yeah right! I'm supposed to believe that between spooning him his oatmeal and giving him his sponge bath you weren't jerkin' his junk?

MARIS

Michael!

DIANE

You're repugnant.

HUGH

(to Maris)

That never happened. We never...

DIANE

My analysis isn't based upon assumptions. Trust me, I did my homework. And with that knowledge, knowing what was best for him, I tried to keep him on a regular schedule with his medication. And when I was successful, he was not a danger to himself.

HUGH

That is strictly your opinion.

DIANE

A well informed and educated opinion, yes.

HUGH

It doesn't matter how much "homework" you did, how could you possibly have known what I was going through? You weren't inside my head. Couldn't you see I was screaming to get out from under that fucking medication?! Even with all your "analysis," couldn't you see what it was doing to me? I couldn't paint.

DIANE

It was, and still is, the appropriate therapy. Without it you were walking in neighborhoods at three in the morning in the rain...

HUGH

So what?! Who gives a shit?!

DIANE

...with dowsing rods and aluminium foil on your head.

HUGH

I was looking for visual or audio contact. Which I found!

DIANE

I'm sure you did. Just like at Woodbury. You were hearing voices and talking to some imaginary beings from God knows where.

HUGH

So what?! So the fuck what?!

DIANE

So, you finally admit it!

HUGH

I'm not out attacking anybody! I'm only painting. *(to Maris)* Is that so horrible?

MARIS

No. It's not.

MICHAEL

If I follow this, you'd become more "normal" if you took the medication but you wouldn't paint anything like this again.

DIANE

(to Michael)

His life is more than just his paintings. In this condition he can't see that. Do you understand?

MICHAEL

(turns to Diane)

That's not what I'm hearing from him.

DIANE

His medication might alter the type or style of his work.

HUGH

"Might!?" You saw my paintings!

MICHAEL

Translation... shitty. It would be "altered" to the style of shitty. Pull your head out of your ass and listen to what he is saying.

(Michael walks over and points to the painting.)

How do you know that he isn't thrilled out of his mind, no pun intended, at creating this caliber of work? And now you, with all your professional wisdom, want to take that away from him?! You, being someone who had so much in common with him that he kicked your ass to the curb!

MARIS

Michael, that's enough!

HUGH

That's private. I don't want to talk about...

DIANE

You repulsive prick! You know nothing about our relationship!

MICHAEL

Maybe not, but here's what I do know for a fact. (*walks over to Hugh*) Art comes from a mysterious place in the brain. They do all these tests to find out, and no one really knows. But what we do know is that it's a whole different realm that most of us can't even comprehend or we'd all be artistic geniuses. We'd all be painting brilliant work. That's the reality.

(Michael points to Hugh's painting on the easel.)

Hugh, look what you are producing now. Are you really aware of how extraordinary it is? I've been in this business, what, twenty years? And I can't name one artist who's exhibited in my gallery, or any gallery for that matter, that has created work like this. Not one.

DIANE

You only care about the money you can make off...

MICHAEL

Hugh, I know we will prosper off your talent. If your work is to be placed out in the world, somebody, somewhere, is going to make money. That's a given. But the main reason I'm here is to give an exceptionally phenomenal artist a shot at getting his work recognized by the widest, most substantial audience possible.

DIANE

Oh, please.

MICHAEL

(to Diane)

Let's talk about Hugh's quality of life for a moment, shall we? He's living in a shitty little loft above an alley where derelicts take a fuckin' dump after their happy meal. He can get the hell out of here and make a better life for himself! How is that a bad thing?!

HUGH

It isn't.

MICHAEL

Of course it isn't!

DIANE

You want me to believe that Hugh having a better life is your main concern? This is not about your compassion toward him.

MICHAEL

Is that so? You've known me for what, ten minutes, Dr. No-Ethics, and now, based on all your clinical research, you're an authority on my intentions? I want Hugh to be able to fulfill his dream. One that I was never able to achieve.

DIANE

Oh, so this is really about *you*. Living *your* unobtainable dream through Hugh.

MICHAEL

No. It's my dream to help someone of talent accomplish *his* dreams. And it's within his grasp.

DIANE

Now suddenly you're his mentor!

MARIS

I think we all want what is best for Hugh. But, ultimately, I don't think it's up...

HUGH

You're all talking like I'm not here.

(Michael pulls Hugh aside.)

MICHAEL

Hugh, life is about moments. A lifetime comes and goes (*he snaps his fingers*) like that. Gone. The day in, day out, get up and go to bed, pay the bills and feed the kids... that's all grey. Nondescript. Nothing remarkable. We all do that. But moments within that lifetime, the things that are remembered, are the colors within our lives. And they are like little, shiny, shimmering dots. And for some of us, if we are amazingly lucky and fortunate, have one dot that everyone remembers. In the history of mankind, in sports, politics, business, art, you name it, what is it that we remember? Moments. Neil Armstrong's stepping onto the moon. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, Monet's Waterlilies. Those are the tiny glistening dots that are never forgotten.

(He picks up a painting and shows Hugh.)

These are your dots! The memorials to your brilliance! We have no right to take them away from you! Nor do you have the right to take them away from all of us other schmucks who have no dots, and are painfully aware of it, but can at least live through yours.

(Hugh walks over to the radiator and stares at it.)

DIANE
 You're pathetic.

MICHAEL
 I'll tell you what's pathetic...

MARIS
 Michael, don't.

MICHAEL
 Your selfish, sorry little ass that preys upon the afflictions of others with the hope that they depend on your moronic advice, which in turn, gives you the false impression that your life has some sort of value.

MARIS
 Michael, that's enough.

DIANE
 Hugh, I have no hidden agenda here. The only reason I'm here is to look out for your welfare.

HUGH
 Normality is a paved road. It's comfortable to walk on but no flowers will ever grow on it. Especially in Russia.

MARIS
 Hugh?

(Diane shoots a look at Michael.)

DIANE
 This is what I'm talk...

MICHAEL
 (to Diane)
 What? It's an excellent point. Is he not allowed to express his opinions?

DIANE
 Hugh, I'm more concerned about your health than your paintings. I only want what is best for you.

MICHAEL
 Clearly, you don't know what's best for him. You know nothing about art or just how incredible his work is.

MARIS

Yes, she does.

MICHAEL

Maris.

MARIS

She does. She told me. She said Hugh's other paintings were just as incredible. So she must know something...

MICHAEL

What other paintings? Not the ones we first saw?

MARIS

No. She mentioned other paintings from some time ago.

HUGH

(vaguely remembering)

There *were* other paintings. My other group of paintings.

(Diane is frozen.)

MICHAEL

What happened to this "other group of paintings?"

HUGH

I don't know.

MICHAEL

You don't know?

HUGH

It was the drugs. I was in a fog most of the time. (*to Diane*) And if my head would clear enough, I'd ask you where my paintings were but you never gave me an answer.

DIANE

You never asked me about any paintings. There might have been a couple but they must have been lost when you moved out.

HUGH

No. It was before that.

MARIS

Wait, you used the word "collection" about his work. That's not just one or two paintings.

DIANE

Let's not focus on back then. Let's talk about what is best for you now and...

HUGH

Diane!

DIANE

Hugh, often times the side effects of the medication can disorient your thoughts as to what...

HUGH

Diane, I want to know about my paintings.

(Michael looks at the paintings and thinks he has the answer.)

DIANE

I only cared about your health. Your mental health. From day one, all I wanted for you was to function on a higher level and not...

HUGH

What happened to my paintings!

DIANE

I did what I thought was...

MICHAEL

You sold them, didn't you?!

DIANE

No!

HUGH

Did you sell my paintings?

DIANE

NO!

HUGH

Diane, tell me!

MICHAEL

You're a liar! You sold them, didn't you!

HUGH

WHAT DID YOU DO WITH MY PAINTINGS!!

DIANE

I BURNED THEM!!!

(SILENCE.)

I BURNED ALL OF THEM!!! EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM!!!

(Maris and Michael are shocked. Hugh turns away, walks a few steps and sinks to the floor. Maris goes to comfort him.)

All of those paintings were constant reminders where you wanted to be, which was off your medication and back to your psychotic behavior! I'd fight you, and fight you to take your medication so you wouldn't go back into that irrational, paranoid, fucking insanity! But no painting was good enough. Always searching for perfection. And the more you'd paint, the more you'd self destruct.

(Diane crosses down to Hugh.)

So when you were hospitalized for the mold, I loaded them out of the attic, where I hid them, and into my car, all forty-eight paintings, and I drove until I found an empty trash bin behind a market and I threw them in. I doused them with lighter fluid, and tossed a match onto the pile.

MICHAEL

Oh, Christ.

(Diane relives the moment.)

DIANE

I parked across the alley and watched them burn. People drove by, but nobody stopped. No one cared. Just me. And when the flames finally faded away, and believe me, I waited until the very last wisp of smoke, I got out and checked inside. Burned my hands on the dumpster looking in. But there was nothing left. They were all gone. Not one survived.

(Diane turns to Hugh.)

I did it for *you*.

(Hugh slowly rises with Maris' help.)

HUGH

No. You did it for *you*. If it was best for me you wouldn't have burned my soul.

DIANE

Hugh. No. That's not true.

(She walks over toward Hugh. Maris steps in front of her. She stops. Hugh holds out his hand.)

HUGH

Give me my key.

(Maris steps aside. Diane finally gets out his key and hands it to him.)

DIANE

I love you.

(Hugh turns away.)

(Diane turns slowly and walks to the exit. She stops and looks back to Michael and Maris.)

If you don't get him some help and destroy these paintings that remind him of how he paints off his medication, he'll continue obsessing until it costs him his life. And that will be on you.

(Diane exits.)

(Silence. Finally...)

MICHAEL

Good. That was good. She needed to hear that. Right between the eyes. She fucked up big time. So she needed to hear that. But look, you got your key back, your independence, so no more interruptions. You're good to go.

(Michael crosses to Hugh.)

HUGH

She said she balanced my surroundings with feng shui. She's worried about water flowing out my window? And she thinks I'm the one who's nuts?

MICHAEL

Your preaching to the choir, Hughie. Nice lady, but she needs to tighten her screws because some are a little loose.

HUGH

Because I touch other realities that she could never, ever, even imagine, doesn't mean I'm the one hallucinating. Or I'm the one who is delusional.

MICHAEL

No question. She doesn't get it.

HUGH

Jupiter is entirely made up of gases.

MICHAEL

What?

MARIS

Hugh?

HUGH

I know what I have to do now.

MICHAEL

Go for it.

(Hugh walks over to his cart, puts some paint on his palette, and picks up his brush.)

Oh yeah, that's what I'm talking about. We get to see genius at work!

(Hugh walks over to the wall switch and starts painting the number 3 on the top and both sides of the switch.)

Okay. Love it. Little warm up on the wall.

(Hugh finishes and looks at Michael.)

333. That's cool. Very hip. Now why don't you get on back to the easel and let the world see just how extraordinary you are on canvas?

(Hugh walks over to Michael.)

HUGH

When my polarity is charged properly, and in balance, which creates movement and flow in my environment, I'm not aware of it because I'm in it. I keep trying to find the right process but every time I end up discovering that in the search of that process, I've already become it.

MICHAEL

(confused)

Okay, you've got your process. Great.

HUGH

So I learned how to balance the energies and deflect any particles that try to poison me. And that's a gift that I embrace. Like "The Keys of Enoch." Chapter 314. I am here to reconnect through my paintings. To change the frequencies that envelop me.

(Hugh grabs his spritzer bottle. Maris steps toward him. He stares at her.)

MARIS

Are you okay?

(He's suddenly confused. Like he's in between worlds.)

Hugh.

HUGH

I've restored my three hundred thirty three vibrational frequency. I've reattached the strings and strands which, in turn, brings light and information to this planet. To That Which Is. We have to re-balance the off balance that's been here for thousands of years.

(Hugh walks to the wall switch.)

And using up the remaining helium on balloons isn't helping.

(He spritzes Michael, puts down the bottle and grabs the screwdriver. He begins to take off the wall switch face plate. He pulls out the wire from the wall and smells it. Maris and Michael are alarmed. Hugh picks up the bottle to spritz the wires.)

MICHAEL

(grabbing the bottle)

No. No. No.

(Maris retreats, nearly breaking down.)

HUGH

Make sure your bed is facing north, but your corn flakes have to face south. Does everyone have to eat their cornflakes facing south? What is abnormal to you may be normal to me or normal to the President or normal to the Pleiadians from Zeta Reticuli.

Not all Pleiadians, but, certainly some. But then you can say, “But they’re from a binary star system thirty-nine light years away, what are the chances they would eat their cornflakes facing south?!” And the answer is pretty fucking slim. But when everyone has finished their cornflakes and all is said and done, what you’ll find is, that the difference is, we’re all different. And you don’t destroy different, you nurture it. Embrace it. Accept it. I’m only painting.

(Silence. Michael approaches Hugh.)

MICHAEL

Very astute, what you said there... about... that cornflake shit. Makes all the sense in the world. You are absolutely right. Some people don’t know how to deal with “different.” That’s what I do. I deal with “different” on a daily basis. So I know what you’re going through. (*beat*) I was also touched by one of those universal... Pilates beings, thirty minutes away, or whatever... the fuck you said. So I get it.

HUGH

Get out.

MICHAEL

I meant that in a good way.

(Hugh stares at Michael.)

Here’s a thought. How about we do a medication thing of six months on, six months off. Coherent then creative.

MARIS

Michael, no.

MICHAEL

Fine. Just take a week. Look what you did in a few days!

MARIS

Go.

(Michael walks over and picks up a stack of paintings. He looks back at Hugh who is glaring at him. Maris signals Michael not to take them.)

MICHAEL

No? Leave them? Okay.

(He sets the paintings back down.)

I'm setting up a whole exhibition for you. Do you understand that?

(Hugh remains silent and transfixed on Michael,
who is unnerved.)

Maris will take care of you. She'll put you to bed facing south or something. Right,
Maris?

(He gestures that she get the paintings over to the
gallery. She gestures for him to leave. He exits.)

(Hugh gets the binoculars and looks out the
window.)

HUGH

Do you think he works for the F.B.I.?

MARIS

No.

HUGH

Maybe C.I.A.

(He places down the binoculars.)

MARIS

Is there...

(He signals to Maris to stay quiet as he checks his
closet, the bathroom, and the refrigerator. He walks
to the downstage left window and looks out. Maris
is overwhelmed with emotion by what she is seeing.)

Is there someone or something... out there... or here? Right now? With us... that you see...
or hear?

(He walks downstage center and looks up to the
night sky.)

MARIS

Or that maybe I can see?

(He doesn't respond. She walks slowly down to him.)

Can you please help me see what you see?

(He continues staring out.)

Hugh.

(She gently takes his arm and turns him toward her.)

Hugh.

(He slowly pulls out of his trance and sees her.)

Hey.

(Hugh smiles and touches her face.)

HUGH

Hey.

(He reaches into his pocket and puts his key to the loft in her hand and kisses her hand. She tries to smile through the emotion.)

MARIS

I'm on your side, okay? I want you to know that. There are no games with me.

HUGH

Games?

MARIS

I've got nothing to hide. I'm here to support you. I'm not here to change you.

HUGH

(suspicious)

Change me? Change me into what?

MARIS

Into anyone you don't want to be.

HUGH

I don't want to be anyone else.

MARIS

Okay. That's fine. I don't *want* you to be anyone else.

HUGH

So what do you want from me now?

MARIS

I can't tell you I know what's it's like to live your life. Only *you* know that. And I don't know enough about your medication and what effect it has on you or how it feels. So it's not my place to tell you to take it. (*beat*) But I'm not sure if I can be a part of your life. I can't go through another call in the dead of night. I just can't. (*beat*) It would destroy me to see you destroy yourself.

HUGH

I don't want to destroy myself. I just want to paint.

MARIS

I know. I know.

HUGH

You said don't let anything get in the way of my art. (*beat*) So what should I do?

MARIS

I don't know. (*beat*) But I can't be here for you if you won't get some help. I just can't. I'm so sorry.

(She places his key on his chair and walks to the door. She stops, walks back and kisses him. She exits.)

(Hugh looks out the window to the street below and watches Maris leave.)

(LIGHTS FADE TO NIGHT)

(The song "Medicine" begins.)

(Hugh stares at the stack of paintings. He walks over and picks up the bottle of pills from the shelf. He takes a brush and looks at the painting of Maris. He looks over at his portrait.)

(A light fades up as Hugh crosses downstage center.)

(Paul and Paul's friend walk out from the darkness to either side of Hugh. They both hold a paint brush and a blank canvas.)

(Paul and his friend each put a hand on Hugh's shoulder.)

(They all turn upstage to look at the projected images of paintings up on the windowpanes.)

(Paul and his friend place their canvasses on separate easels and freeze as they lift their brushes to each canvas.)

(Hugh turns back downstage and looks at the bottle of medicine and brush in his hands. He looks out, contemplating his fate. His self portrait fills the windowpanes.)

(His spotlight cross fades into a pin spot on his face.)

(We hold... then... to black. CURTAIN.)